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A Study of Conflict Talk in the US-Ukraine Leaders' Dialogue from the Perspective of Impoliteness Theory

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Abstract: As an important theoretical framework in the field of pragmatics, impoliteness theory focuses on deliberate verbal and nonverbal behaviors that intentionally breach established social norms and consequently impair interpersonal bonds. Conflict talk, a closely related phenomenon, refers to confrontational discourse arising from fundamentally divergent viewpoints and competing objectives between communicators. Taking the highly publicized US-Ukraine leaders' summit held on February 28, 2025, as the primary research corpus, this study conducts a comprehensive and systematic analysis based on the foundational principles of impoliteness theory. Through detailed discourse analysis, it is found that United States representatives extensively deployed five major impoliteness strategies---namely, bald on record impoliteness, positive impoliteness, negative impoliteness, sarcasm or mock politeness, and withhold politeness---to reinforce their dominant geopolitical position and assert control over the negotiation. In stark contrast, the visiting head of state mainly reacted defensively, attempting to mitigate face threats while advocating for his nation's critical needs. These intense linguistic confrontations not only mirror substantial ideological and strategic divergences concerning the ongoing conflict and future military aid policies, but they also profoundly reveal how power asymmetry, complex face negotiation, and conflicting national interests interact dynamically in high-stakes diplomatic scenarios. Ultimately, this research sheds critical light on the underlying nature of verbal conflicts within international political discourse, offering valuable theoretical implications and practical insights for advancing diplomatic communication, international relations, and global conflict management strategies.

Keywords: impoliteness theory; conflict talk; diplomatic dialogue; pragmatics

1. Introduction

As a core theoretical framework in pragmatics, impoliteness theory investigates intentional verbal behaviors that challenge interpersonal harmony and affect social bonds [1]. Developed based on classic face theory, it highlights that impoliteness is a consciously adopted communicative strategy for face-related interactions. As a common linguistic phenomenon, certain types of verbal exchanges may include disagreements, rebuttals, and debates, which arise from differing perspectives and generate communicative complexities.

Against this theoretical backdrop, this study examines a prominent diplomatic case study: the summit between the heads of state of the United States and Ukraine held on February 28, 2025. Although the meeting was initially convened to finalize a bilateral minerals agreement and a joint press conference, it culminated in an intense verbal confrontation. Consequently, the visiting head of state departed the venue prematurely, the scheduled press conference was aborted, and the bilateral agreement remained unfinalized [2]. This high-profile diplomatic friction provides a representative corpus for exploring conflict talk within international political discourse. The research data analyzed herein are systematically derived from available official transcripts and authenticated video recordings.

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This paper takes the above dialogue as its research object and applies impoliteness theory to explore two core research questions: first, what categories of impoliteness strategies are used in the dialogue; second, what pragmatic motivations underlie these linguistic strategies. By analyzing the dynamics of power, differing national priorities, and cultural variations reflected in the conversation, this research further expands the practical application of pragmatics in the field of diplomatic discourse analysis [3].

2. Literature Review

Among foreign scholars, several researchers have been influential in the study of impoliteness. In contrast, domestic research remains in an exploratory stage, with a notable tendency to apply foreign theoretical frameworks to analyze impoliteness phenomena in Chinese. This section reviews the development of impoliteness theories both domestically and internationally [2].

2.1. Previous Studies at Home

Research on impoliteness within China began relatively late [4]. While interest in this area has grown since 2005, the overall progress remains modest compared to developments in Western academia. The evolution of impoliteness theory domestically can be categorized into two distinct stages.

2.1.1. Early Introduction

In the early stage, while classic politeness theory was being introduced, the phenomenon of impoliteness had already been noticed, with attempts made to extend the theory by analyzing language use in literary classics such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*. On this basis, domestic research first focused on the micro-level definition and classification of impoliteness [5]. Impolite speech acts were divided into strategic and non-strategic types. Based on the intentions of the speaker and the hearer, four different types were further distinguished. Previous research was also reviewed to define impoliteness from a multidimensional pragmatic perspective. In terms of effect and degree of awareness, impoliteness was further classified into contrasting categories: superficial vs. substantive and conscious vs. unconscious.

2.1.2. Theoretical Application

At the level of theoretical interpretation, domestic research has mainly proceeded along two paths: one is drawing on foreign theoretical frameworks to analyze impoliteness phenomena in Chinese, and the other is attempting to construct new theoretical systems. In terms of drawing on existing theories, Linguistic Adaptation Theory and Rapport Management Theory have served as the primary analytical tools [6]. Initial explorations were made into the theory of verbal impoliteness. Subsequently, Adaptation Theory was applied to conduct in-depth discussions on the causes and strategies of impolite speech acts. In recent years, a large body of research has focused on explaining the generative mechanisms of impoliteness from the perspective of adaptation. At the same time, studies on verbal interactions have examined the nature of interpersonal dynamics through the degree of face threat. Moreover, Rapport Management Theory has been used to re-examine verbal impoliteness and reconceptualize interpersonal politeness. Impoliteness phenomena in television programs and political discourse have also been explored from different perspectives. In terms of theoretical innovation and system construction, valuable attempts have been made. Politeness and impoliteness were integrated within a single framework, constructing a continuum from high politeness to low politeness. Furthermore, the positive functions of impolite speech acts were explored in terms of both emotion and connotation, enriching the existing theories.

To sum up, domestic studies on impoliteness have evolved from initial phenomenon categorization and the introduction of overseas theories into multi-dimensional integration and the development of localized theoretical systems. That said, the majority of existing research stays at the stage of theoretical application. Empirical investigations

into real political discourse, especially within cross-cultural diplomatic interactions, are still inadequate.

2.2. *Previous Studies Overseas*

Since the late 20th century, the international academic community has increasingly acknowledged the lack of research on impoliteness, prompting a shift in focus from politeness to impoliteness [2]. Significant contributions have been made to theoretical frameworks, while diverse perspectives have further expanded the field.

2.2.1. Foundational Theoretical Frameworks

As a pioneering approach, drawing on classic face theory, a system of five impoliteness superstrategies was proposed corresponding to traditional politeness strategies: (1) bald on-record impoliteness, which directly undermines the hearer's face; (2) positive impoliteness, which damages the hearer's positive face wants; (3) negative impoliteness, which damages the hearer's negative face wants; (4) sarcasm or mock politeness, which employs obviously insincere politeness strategies that appear superficially polite but actually convey the intention to harm the hearer's face; and (5) withholding politeness, which deliberately refrains from expressing politeness when it is expected, such as intentionally not expressing gratitude upon receiving a gift. Since then, this framework has been continuously revised: in 2003, it was applied to discourse analysis to construct a dynamic model of response to impoliteness that incorporated the hearer's reactions and the offensive intensification effects of strategy combination; in 2005, the fourth strategy was revised to "off-record impoliteness"; in 2010, research explored conventionalized impoliteness formulae, emphasizing the role of specific contexts; and in 2011, a seminal monograph was published which drew on findings in pragmatics and social psychology, abandoned the distinction between positive and negative face, and established a context-based "socio-cognitive" system integrating discourse production and evaluation [7]. Although this theory has been criticized for paying insufficient attention to socio-cultural factors, its systematicity and operability have had a considerable impact on the academic community.

2.2.2. Theoretical Refinement and Simplification

The first monograph specifically dedicated to impoliteness in interaction was later published, which critically incorporated previous theories and streamlined the five superstrategies into on-record and off-record impoliteness, emphasizing that both positive and negative impoliteness components can coexist in either strategy [8]. Drawing on extensive data, the dynamics of impoliteness were explored at three levels---conversation, discourse, and turn-taking mechanisms: in the opening stage, triggers and pre-sequences were analyzed; in the middle stage, the response model was expanded into a "dynamic model of response options to impoliteness"; and in the closing stage, various types and combinations of interaction termination were examined. In 2008, a co-edited collected volume brought together theoretical and empirical findings on impoliteness for the first time, further advancing the development of the field.

2.2.3. Multidimensional Expansion

Other research has also contributed important perspectives. Different characteristics of impolite speech in institutional and non-institutional contexts have been compared [9]. Distinctions have been made between explicit and implicit impoliteness, emphasizing that the judgment of impoliteness should pay more attention to implicit dimensions such as speaker intention, hearer impact, and context. It has also been pointed out that studying only the interpersonal interaction level is insufficient, advocating for the examination of impoliteness from cross-cultural and social perspectives. Moreover, data from Japanese, Spanish, and other languages have been used to analyze impoliteness phenomena across different cultural backgrounds, thereby broadening the linguistic scope and perspectives of the research.

To conclude, the original five-category framework features greater granularity and has been constantly updated. By contrast, the simplified classification into on-record and

off-record impoliteness offers higher practical operability. This research selects the five-category model because it can capture subtle differences in diplomatic impoliteness. In diplomatic exchanges, indirect impoliteness including sarcasm occupies a prominent position, making a detailed classification essential.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Analytical Procedures

This study employs a three-step qualitative analysis for the collected dialogue data. First, all utterances containing explicit or implicit verbal threats, interruptions, directives, or sarcasm are identified for their potential to challenge the hearer's face. Second, each identified utterance is categorized into one of the established five impoliteness strategies based on its dominant pragmatic function [10]. This research adheres to the primary function rule: if a single utterance contains multiple impoliteness tactics, the strategy that reflects the speaker's main illocutionary intention is selected; when two or more strategies are equally prominent, double labeling is applied with detailed explanations. Third, combined with specific contexts and discourse turns, this study examines the underlying pragmatic motivations of each impoliteness strategy, such as asserting authority, face-threatening acts, and emotional expression.

3.2. Strategy Identification Criteria

Bald on-record impoliteness refers to direct and overt challenges to another's position or authority, exemplified by the utterance "You are in no position...". Positive impoliteness consists of acts that undermine the hearer's positive face by diminishing their identity, competence, or values. Negative impoliteness disrupts the hearer's negative face through interruptions, orders, and imposition of obligations [4]. Sarcastic impoliteness describes utterances that appear polite or neutral on the surface but convey disdain through irony or metaphor. Withholding politeness involves intentionally omitting conventional polite behaviors, such as greetings, expressions of gratitude, or empathy.

If an utterance aligns with more than one set of criteria, the dominant strategy is identified based on the most prominent feature evident in the specific context [11].

4. Analysis of Conflict Language in the US-Ukraine Leaders' Dialogue

4.1. The Use of Bald On-Record Impoliteness Strategy

The direct impoliteness strategy conveys assertiveness through explicit and unambiguous language, without relying on contextual implications [12]. It often manifests as strong statements or accusations. In communication, individuals typically prioritize maintaining their own position; however, within such discourse, they may resort to challenging others' standing to reinforce their own.

Example 1. Speaker A: You are in no position to dictate what we are going to feel [13]. We are gonna feel very good and very strong.

This statement demonstrates Speaker A's direct rejection of Speaker B's input [14]. By stating "in no position," Speaker A explicitly dismissed Speaker B's equal standing in the discussion. The use of "dictate" reframed Speaker B's expression of views as an overreach of authority, which could be interpreted as undermining the collaborative nature of dialogue. The phrase "We are gonna feel very good" conveyed a tone of self-assurance, implying decisions were unilateral and did not require further consideration of Speaker B's perspective. Such direct language challenges the principle of mutual respect in discussions, emphasizing a one-sided assertion of authority.

Example 2. Speaker C: I think it is disrespectful for you to come into this setting and try to litigate this in front of the media [15].

This statement reflects Speaker C's direct critique of Speaker B's actions. Speaker C characterized Speaker B's statements as inappropriate, bypassing mutual understanding. The term "litigate" equated the discussion to a confrontational scenario, suggesting that Speaker B's remarks were unwarranted [16]. Additionally, the phrase "in front of the media" highlighted the public nature of the setting, potentially increasing external

pressure on Speaker B. This approach aimed to assert influence while safeguarding Speaker C's position from potential scrutiny.

4.2. The Use of Positive Impoliteness Strategy

Positive impoliteness strategy involves directly challenging the target's positive face (i.e., the need for recognition and respect) through criticism, provocation, or other confrontational acts [17].

Example 1. You are playing cards. You are making decisions that could impact the lives of millions of people [3]. You are taking actions with potentially global consequences.

This metaphor critiques decision-making as irresponsible risk-taking [4]. It questions the soundness of leadership and suggests that such decisions could lead to significant global challenges. The term "playing cards" carries a strong negative connotation, implying recklessness. In formal discussions, using such terminology is considered highly inappropriate as it undermines authority and credibility during negotiations.

Example 2. Speaker D: Do you disagree that you have faced challenges, such as maintaining sufficient personnel in your organization?

This rhetorical question highlights organizational challenges, implicitly compelling acknowledgment of these issues. In formal contexts, publicly addressing such vulnerabilities is highly sensitive. This tactic exposes strategic weaknesses and, through the provocative "Do you disagree?", pressures the individual to concede shortcomings. This primarily functions as positive impoliteness (damaging the image of competence), but it also contains elements of negative impoliteness (limiting the freedom to reject the premise). Following the primary function rule, it is classified as positive impoliteness because the core focus lies in the critique of competence.

The speaker's intent appears to be undermining credibility as a leader, thereby weakening negotiation leverage. Additionally, it serves an audience-oriented goal: projecting assertiveness for the benefit of external observers [14].

4.3. The Use of Negative Impoliteness Strategy

Negative impoliteness strategies involve behaviors that disrupt others' ability to maintain personal boundaries, such as interrupting, issuing directives, or disregarding their input [12].

Example 1.

Speaker A: So, the event occurred in 2014.....

Speaker B: 2015.

Speaker A: 2014.

Speaker B: 2014- I was not involved then.

During Speaker A's explanation of a historical event, Speaker B interrupted multiple times to correct the timeline. Speaker B emphasized, "I was not involved then," to distance themselves from any association. This behavior disrupts conversational norms by preventing Speaker A from fully expressing their perspective. By interrupting, Speaker B infringes on Speaker A's ability to communicate freely, a clear example of negative impoliteness. Additionally, the repeated corrections implicitly question the reliability of Speaker A's account, further undermining their credibility.

Speaker B appears to aim at controlling the discussion and deflecting accountability. The interruptions and corrections redirect attention away from the core issue, preserving Speaker B's position while asserting influence over the narrative.

Example 2. Speaker C: You should be expressing gratitude for efforts to resolve this situation...

The phrase "should be expressing gratitude" imposes an obligation diplomatically. Speaker C frames external assistance as a favor requiring acknowledgment, disregarding the contributions of others and diminishing their agency. This approach primarily constitutes negative impoliteness due to the enforced obligation, with minor elements of positive impoliteness. Following the primary function rule, it is categorized as negative impoliteness, as the imposition is the dominant face-threatening act. Speaker C's approach seeks to establish moral superiority, thereby legitimizing their demands and reducing the

opportunity for critique. Speaker A intended to highlight significant contributions but was interrupted before completing their response.

4.4. The Use of Sarcastic Impoliteness Strategy

Sarcastic impoliteness, as redefined in 2005, involves indirect expressions of aggression through irony, exaggeration, or metaphor [7]. The literal meaning of such expressions contrasts with their underlying intent, often employing mock praise or contrast to diminish others. This strategy is characterized by plausible deniability, enabling speakers to claim their remarks were humorous or factual rather than offensive.

Example 1. Assistance was described as basic supplies versus advanced equipment [7].

The comparison highlights a sharp contrast between two forms of aid, with one being portrayed as less significant and the other as more impactful. This rhetorical strategy serves to elevate the speaker's contributions while subtly undermining previous efforts. The use of such language conveys an implicit expectation of acknowledgment and gratitude.

This approach aims to enhance the speaker's image by diminishing others, presenting them as a decisive and influential figure. Additionally, the indirect nature of sarcasm allows for the denial of any offensive intent, maintaining a veneer of neutrality.

Example 2. Negotiations were likened to a strategic game, emphasizing external support as a key factor [11].

The metaphor of a card game suggests that bargaining power is contingent on external backing, subtly implying a lack of autonomy. While the tone appears cooperative, the underlying message reinforces dependency. This indirect approach exemplifies sarcastic impoliteness, as it combines a seemingly neutral statement with an implicit critique [3, 10].

The metaphor serves to assert influence while minimizing overt confrontation, encouraging compliance through subtle pressure. Reports indicate differing perspectives on this view, with emphasis placed on self-reliance in certain contexts.

4.5. The Use of Withholding Impoliteness Strategy

Withholding politeness refers to intentionally omitting conventionally expected polite acts such as greetings, expressions of gratitude, and empathy. In formal communication, remarks of this nature can convey a lack of respect. Unlike direct expressions of disagreement, this strategy passively denies the recipient the expected courtesy [2, 7].

Example 1.

Speaker A: From the very beginning of the situation, we have faced challenges and we are thankful...

Speaker B: You have not been alone. We provided significant support [12].

Speaker A expressed challenges and gratitude, but Speaker B interrupted and responded with a specific figure, disregarding the emotional context. This reduced the interaction to a transactional exchange, omitting acknowledgment of the hardships faced. A more considerate response would have included recognition of the difficulties or acceptance of the gratitude expressed. Instead, the reply reframed the support as a completed transaction rather than ongoing collaboration.

Speaker B's approach framed the relationship as one of obligation, potentially justifying future demands and diminishing the moral perspective of the recipient [14]. By withholding empathy, the dialogue shifted toward a purely materialistic exchange.

Example 2. Speaker C: Have you expressed gratitude sufficiently?

Speaker C began with a direct question, bypassing standard formalities [6]. This presupposed insufficient gratitude and framed it as an unmet obligation, deviating from conventional etiquette. By omitting polite preliminaries, Speaker C placed the other party in a defensive position, diverting focus from substantive issues. This tactic aimed to control the dialogue and shift the burden of proof, compelling the other party to justify their position.

In the dynamics between the speakers, the frequent use of impoliteness strategies reinforced an imbalance of influence through linguistic means [4, 8]. This strategic approach altered the nature of the interaction from collaborative discussion to one-sided control, ultimately leading to communication challenges. This aligns with the concept that impoliteness can serve as a projection of power dynamics in discourse.

5. Reasons for the Emergence of Conflict Talk

The strategies observed in the dialogue serve clear pragmatic purposes. This section generalizes the major pragmatic motivations reflected in the conversation and further analyzes three underlying causes of the diplomatic discourse [9].

5.1. The Fundamental Divergence in Core Interests

As shown in the case analysis, certain rhetorical strategies were employed to portray external assistance as a one-sided act of generosity, compelling the recipient to express gratitude. These tactics aim to position the recipient as dependent on external support, rather than as an equal collaborator, thereby diminishing its ability to make further requests.

Such linguistic dynamics arise from differing priorities. One party seeks economic advantages through agreements involving resource access, while the other focuses on securing favorable conditions amidst broader challenges. This divergence forms the basis of their differing approaches. During discussions, one side emphasized the need for additional support and assurances, while the other prioritized economic interests, leading to verbal exchanges characterized by the aforementioned rhetorical strategies.

5.2. Power Asymmetry and Face Maintenance

Representatives from one side frequently employed direct and assertive communication strategies, minimizing politeness to emphasize their superior position and establish a hierarchical interaction. In contrast, the responses from the other side were primarily defensive, aiming to resist perceived challenges and uphold their dignity and leadership image [2].

This dynamic stems from a significant disparity in overall capabilities between the two parties. The stronger side, leveraging its advantages in various domains, adopted a firm stance to assert its position, prompting the other side to respond by emphasizing its challenges and preserving its image. For instance, when one representative accused the other of disrespect, the latter countered by highlighting the difficulties faced in their context. Such exchanges reflect ongoing efforts to navigate power dynamics and maintain face. The stronger party freely employed strategies that could challenge the other's image, while the latter focused on safeguarding its own standing.

5.3. Cultural Differences in Communication Styles

Speakers from certain regions often employ interruptions, direct corrections, and straightforward expressions, reflecting a communicative style that emphasizes directness and goal achievement over interpersonal rapport. In contrast, others may begin remarks with contextual explanations and emotional appeals, representing a narrative and rapport-focused style. The interaction between these differing styles can amplify perceptions of impoliteness.

These linguistic differences stem from distinct cultural and diplomatic norms. Some political discourse prioritizes direct and assertive expressions to maximize immediate advantages, while others place significant importance on maintaining dignity and sensitivity in interactions [13]. These differing perspectives can lead to varying interpretations of remarks, potentially creating misunderstandings and defensive responses. In this way, cultural disparities may influence diplomatic exchanges.

In summary, a consistent pattern emerges from the analysis: one side may actively employ various strategies to assert control and redefine relational dynamics, while the other side may respond in a more defensive manner. Overall, pragmatic goals such as interaction management, relational adjustments, and conversational redefinition are

achieved through tailored communicative approaches based on specific situational needs [11, 12].

6. Conclusions

This paper applies an impoliteness framework to a high-stakes leaders' dialogue in 2025. The analysis shows that one side employed all five impoliteness strategies to assert a stronger interactional position and threaten the other side's face, while the other side mainly responded defensively under asymmetrical power relations. Power assertion, face aggression, and emotional neglect are the main pragmatic motivations. The interaction is fundamentally shaped by divergent interests, power asymmetry, and cross-cultural differences in communication. For diplomatic practice, direct face-threatening expressions and provocative sarcastic metaphors should be avoided. Empathy is also essential when responding to the counterpart's emotional appeals.

Limitations and Future Directions: This study is limited to a single case and relies only on written transcripts, without analyzing non-verbal or prosodic features or audience perception. Subsequent studies can compare impoliteness across different diplomatic settings, explore interpreter-mediated impoliteness, or conduct experiments on audience reception of impolite language.

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